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8

The Isaurian Dynasty and Iconoclasm

250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
717	Leo III emperor				
717–718	Arab siege of Constantinople				
726	Beginning of Iconoclasm				
787	First restoration of ikons				
800	Coronation of Charlemagne				

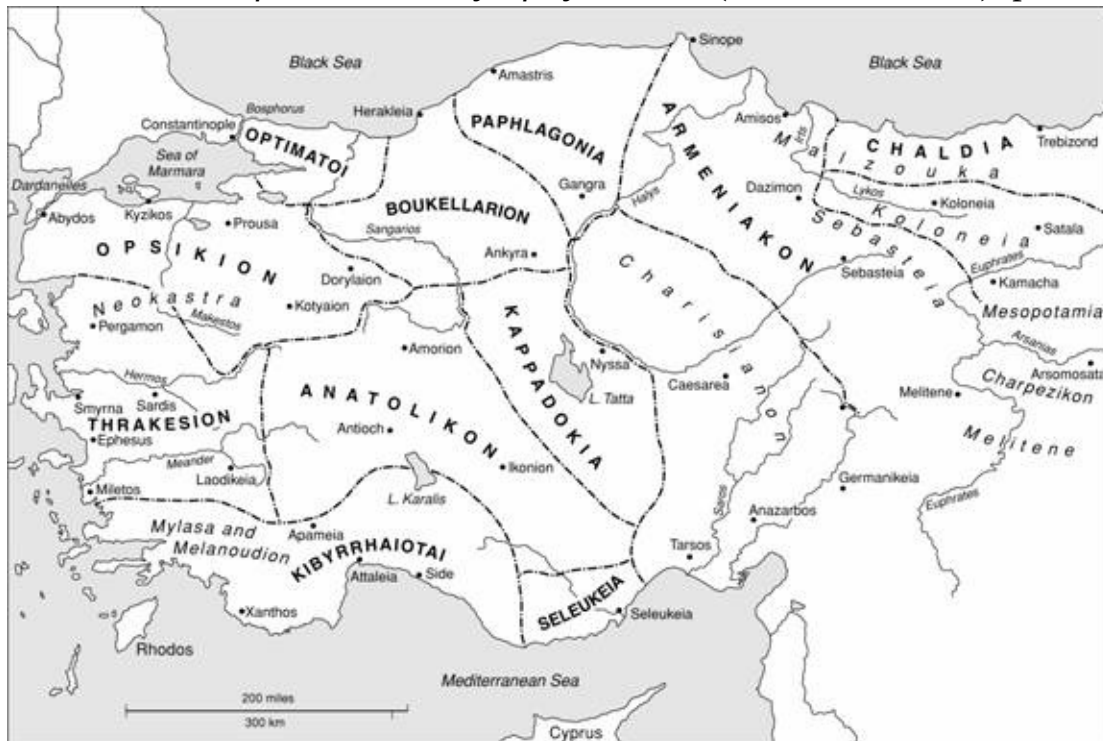
Leo III (717–741)

Leo III, like Herakleios, intervened in Byzantine politics at a decisive moment, and he set the state on a sound basis, militarily and politically. His first problem was an Arab siege of Constantinople, which began almost immediately after he seized the throne. After withstanding the siege, Leo began to carry the war to the Arab armies and he succeeded, by the end of his reign, in freeing western Asia Minor from Arab raids. In domestic matters he is best known for his codification of law, the *Ekloga*, and his policy of Iconoclasm. The investigation of the latter is particularly difficult because the Iconophile sources are universal in their condemnation of the emperor, and there are virtually no extant Iconoclast sources.

Leo's family had come from Syria and was settled in Thrace as part of Justinian II's policy of population transfers. The appellation "Isaurian" for Leo and his dynasty is thus probably a misnomer. Leo had come to the attention of Justinian II when he helped the emperor regain his throne in 705, and he rose to prominence in the army. He became *strategos* of the Anatolikon *theme* under Anastasios II, and during the reign of Theodosios III Leo allied with Ardavasdos, *strategos* of Armeniakon, and seized the throne in 717. He found

the capital in a situation of some distress after 30 years of political instability.

Map 8.1 *Themes in Asia Minor after the seventh century* (after A. Kazhdan et al., eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York, 1991), p. 2035)



Because of the confusion in Constantinople since the death of Constantine IV, the Arabs had made considerable headway in Asia Minor, and the Arab general Maslama (brother of the caliphs Walid, Sulayman, and Yazid (705–24)) planned another direct attack on the capital. The siege of Constantinople began in August of 717, supported by Sulayman's navy. Leo won a victory in Asia Minor and attacked the Arabs from the rear, while his Bulgar allies (under Tervel) attacked from the west, and Greek Fire again did its work on the Arab fleet. As a result, Maslama withdrew in August of 718 after absorbing heavy losses.

The *theme* system was now fully operational and it provided considerable strength in the face of continued Arab raids. Thus, when the caliph al-Malik (723–42) pushed deep into Byzantine territory, Leo won signal victories at Nicaea in 726 and Akroinon in 740 (Map 9.1), so that by the end of his reign western Asia Minor was relatively secure against Arab incursions. In part, Leo's successes against the Arabs were the result of his alliance with the Georgians and Khazars. As we have seen, the Khazars, a semi-nomadic Turkic people who lived north of the Black Sea, could attack the Arabs from the rear, and they had been involved in Byzantine policy at least since the marriage of Justinian II to

the khan's daughter. Leo cemented his own alliance with the Khazars by marrying his son Constantine to a Khazar princess.

Just like his predecessors, Leo had to face several revolts, especially at the beginning of his reign, most of them led by *theme* commanders. Leo understood the problems with this system, since he had himself come to power in this way, and he responded by providing greater central control and perhaps also by dividing up several of the larger *themes* into smaller entities, thereby diminishing the power of any individual *theme* commander. This is not to say that the fear of revolts was the only reason for the division of the *themes*; in part it was an indication that the military situation, especially in Asia Minor, had improved from the catastrophic years of the seventh century, and that the administrative system of the *themes* was working well generally.

Leo was a careful administrator and an autocrat. Both of these characteristics are shown in the *Ekloga*, a legal codification, issued probably in 726 (or possibly 741). According to the preface of the text, God had entrusted the emperor with the promotion of justice throughout the world, and the new code was part of the emperor's attempt to promote just that. In his view, the current codifications of law were confusing and largely incomprehensible (in part because they were contradictory and still largely in Latin). Judges and lawyers, not only (according to the *Ekloga*) in the provinces, but also in the "God-protected city" (Constantinople) were ignorant of what the law said. The *Ekloga* was a practical handbook designed for everyday use, rather than a treatise that provided a theoretical base for the law. It restricted the right of divorce and provided a long list of sexual crimes. The *Ekloga* also introduced

Box 8.1 The Ekloga and Byzantine Society of the Eighth Century

The *Ekloga* of Leo III is a most interesting document because it reveals much of the personality of the emperor and the changes that had been taking place in society since the days of Constantine I. This law code was probably issued in 726 (but possibly in 741), the same year as the beginning of the Iconoclastic controversy, and it demonstrates the emperor's firm belief that he was responsible, before God, for the good and proper governance of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire.

The provisions of the text are remarkably clear and easy to understand – making it easier for governors in provincial areas to pronounce judgment and assign punishment. The laws deal mainly with day-to-day issues of landowning and personal relations, but large sections reflect the influence that the church and Christian morality had on the society of the time.

One aspect of the code that has attracted considerable attention is the use of mutilation – the cutting off of body parts, including the nose – as a penalty. Some have seen in this the influence of

Near Eastern practices, and this may be the case, but others have pointed to the preface of the code, which speaks of the humanization of punishment and point out that the penalty for most of the same crimes in earlier Roman law would have been death. In fact, our understanding of the impact of the *Ekloga* depends to a large degree on our own point of view: on the one hand, the *Ekloga* is harsh and brutal in its punishments, but on the other it allowed people to understand exactly where they stood under the law – arguably for the first time in the history of Western civilization (since virtually all earlier systems had been written in ways that would have been essentially unintelligible to most people), and – as mentioned before – it did provide women with protections that they had not enjoyed in previous legislation.

Here are some of the provisions concerning marriage:

The marriage of Christians, man and woman, who have reached years of discretion, that is for a man at fifteen and for a woman at thirteen years of age, both being desirous and having obtained the consent of their parents, shall be contracted either by deed or by parole [word of honor].

A written marriage contract shall be based upon a written agreement providing the wife's marriage portion; and it shall be made before three credible witnesses according to the new decrees auspiciously prescribed by us. The man on his part agreeing by it continually to protect and preserve undiminished the wife's marriage portion, and also such additions as he may naturally make thereto in augmentation thereof; and it shall be recorded in the agreement made on that in case there are no children, one-fourth part thereof shall be secured in settlement.

If the wife happens to predecease the husband and there are no children of the marriage, the husband shall receive only one-fourth part of the wife's portion for himself, and the remainder thereof shall be given to the beneficiaries named in the wife's will or, if she be intestate, to the next of kin. If the husband predeceases the wife, and there are no children of the marriage, then all the wife's portion shall revert to her, and so much of her husband's estate as shall be equal to a fourth part of his portion shall also inure to her as her own, and the remainder of his estate shall revert either to his beneficiaries or, if he be intestate, to his next of kin.

As mentioned, the *Ekloga* is probably best known for the severity and brutality of its punishments. Below are some of the regulations for sexual crime. Notice that what is here translated as having one's "nose slit," actually means having the nose cut off – a particularly horrifying and disfiguring punishment.

A married man who commits adultery shall by way of correction be flogged with twelve lashes; and whether rich or poor he shall pay a fine.

An unmarried man who commits fornication shall be flogged with six lashes.

A person who has carnal knowledge of a nun shall, upon the footing that he is debauching the Church of God, have his nose slit, because he committed wicked adultery with her who belonged to the Church; and she on her side must take heed lest similar punishment be reserved to her.

Anyone who, intending to take in marriage a woman who is his goddaughter in Salvation-bringing baptism, has carnal knowledge of her without marrying her, and being found guilty of the offence shall, after being exiled, be condemned to the same punishment meted out for other adultery, that is to say, both the man and the woman shall have their noses slit.

The husband who is cognizant of, and condones, his wife's adultery shall be flogged and exiled, and the adulterer and the adulteress shall have their noses slit. (*A Manual of Roman Law: The Ekloga*, trans. E. Freshfield (Cambridge, 1926), pp. 72–4, 108–12; repr. in Deno Geanakoplos, *Byzantium* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 266–7, 278)

a new system of punishment, including judicial mutilation, but practically did

away with capital punishment.

Ikons and the Theory of Ikons

As we have seen, early Christian art had largely avoided the depiction of Christ and the saints, confining itself instead to symbolic representations, probably because of the Mosaic prohibition of the worship of idols. Slowly, however, and especially after the conversion of Constantine, religious pictures began to be employed. Not all Christians accepted these depictions, and, as mentioned earlier, Eusebios of Caesarea was one of those who apparently opposed the new trend.

Figure 8.1 Icon. Virgin and Child with two saints, from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, sixth century, probably originally from Constantinople. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



Ikons (*eikones*, “images”) were physical depictions of God and the saints, normally two-dimensional pictures, often painted on wood, that were used for devotional purposes. Ikons seem to have originated in the same tradition as that of the cults of the saints and relics; that is, they were seen not primarily as art but as powerful religious tools that could help mankind span the enormous gap between the human and the divine. Some ikons were said to have been painted

by contemporaries of Jesus, such as the Evangelist Luke, or they were viewed as *acheiropoieta* (“not made by human hands”) and their creation was thus regarded as miraculous.

Despite some misgivings, the use of ikons continued to grow and the decoration of many surviving churches of the fifth and sixth centuries shows that, alongside the continued use of symbols and symbolic representations of Christ (e.g., Christ as a lamb, the use of the Christogram (the Chi-Rho)), churches were commonly decorated with lifelike depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. There is reason to believe that in the sixth century, especially in the second half, the use of ikons became more widespread, as personal devotion to them increased and as political and religious leaders identified themselves

Box 8.2 The Theory of Ikons

John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 753) was an Arab Christian, many of whose family worked in the financial administration of the Ummayyad caliphate. He was an important Byzantine theologian and wrote a large number of synthetic works in Greek. He was a staunch opponent of Iconoclasm and, because he lived outside the Byzantine Empire, he was able to express that opposition openly. His works provide the clearest explanation of the Byzantine views on ikons and their place in Christian worship.

In his book, *On Images*, written apparently in 730, right at the beginning of the Iconoclastic controversy, he begins with a consideration of how ikons can be venerated, even though the Second Commandment clearly forbade the worship of “graven images”:

You see that He forbids image-making on account of idolatry, and that it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, uncircumscribed, invisible God. You have not seen the likeness of Him, the Scripture says, and this was St Paul’s testimony as he stood in the midst of the Areopagus: “Being, therefore, the offspring of God, we must not suppose the divinity to be like unto gold, or silver, or stone, the graving of art, and device of man.” (Acts 17.29)

These injunctions were given to the Jews on account of their proneness to idolatry. Now we, on the contrary, are no longer in leading strings. Speaking theologically, it is given to us to avoid superstitious error, to be with God in the knowledge of the truth, to worship God alone, to enjoy the fulness of His knowledge. We have passed the stage of infancy, and reached the perfection of manhood. We receive our habit of mind from God, and know what may be imaged and what may not. The Scripture says, “You have not seen the likeness of Him.” (Ex. 33.20) What wisdom in the law-giver. How depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How give expression to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give a form to immensity? How paint immortality? How localise mystery? It is clear that when you contemplate God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, you will be able to clothe Him with the human form. When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form. When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it. (St. John Damascene, *On Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London, 1898), pp. 7–9)

Later he arrives at the task of discussing the relationship between the image and the original:

An image is a likeness of the original with a certain difference, for it is not an exact reproduction of the original. Thus, the Son is the living, substantial, unchangeable Image of the invisible God (Col. 1.15), bearing in Himself the whole Father, being in all things equal to Him, differing only in being begotten by the Father, who is the Begetter; the Son is begotten. The Father does not proceed from the Son, but the Son from the Father. It is through the Son, though not after Him, that He is what He is, the Father who generates. In God, too, there are representations and images of His future acts, that is to say, His counsel from all eternity, which is ever unchangeable. That which is divine is immutable; there is no change in Him, nor shadow of change. (James 1.17) (p. 10)

John then went on to say that there are different forms of worship. The highest form, which he describes with the Greek term *latreia*, is reserved for God and only for God. There are, in his view, other, somewhat lesser forms of worship, which we might call veneration or religious respect, and these are appropriate for objects such as the Jewish Ark of the Covenant and the Temple in Jerusalem. He goes on, then, to summarize the ways in which he thinks ikons can be used and their appropriateness in Christian worship:

Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, (Bar. 3.38) I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out of lifeless things? And if God's body is God by union (*kath'ypostasin*), it is immutable. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh created in time is quickened by a logical and reasoning soul. I honour all matter besides, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice happy and thrice blessed wood of the Cross matter? Was not the sacred and holy mountain of Calvary matter? What of the life-giving rock, the Holy Sepulchre, the source of our resurrection: was it not matter? Is not the most holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the blessed table matter which gives us the Bread of Life? Are not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and altar-plate and chalices are made? And before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either do away with the veneration and worship due to all these things, or submit to the tradition of the Church in the worship of images, honouring God and His friends, and following in this the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing is that which God has made. This is the Manichean heresy. That alone is despicable which does not come from God, but is our own invention, the spontaneous choice of will to disregard the natural law, – that is to say, sin. If, therefore, you dishonour and give up images, because they are produced by matter, consider what the Scripture says: And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Behold I have called by name Beseleel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Juda. And I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom and understanding, and knowledge in all manner of work. To devise whatsoever may be artificially made of gold, and silver, and brass, of marble and precious stones, and variety of wood. And I have given him for his companion, Ooliab, the son of Achisamech, of the tribe of Dan. And I have put wisdom in the heart of every skilful man, that they may make all things which I have commanded thee.” (Ex. 31.1–6) And again: “Moses said to all the assembly of the children of Israel: This is the word the Lord hath commanded, saying: Set aside with you first fruits to the Lord. Let every one that is willing and hath a ready heart, offer them to the Lord, gold, and silver, and brass, violet, and purple, and scarlet twice dyed, and fine linen, goat's hair, and ram's skins died red and violet, coloured skins, selim-wood, and oil to maintain lights and to make ointment, and most sweet incense, onyx stones, and precious stones for the adorning of the ephod and the rational. Whosoever of you is wise, let him come, and make that which the Lord hath commanded.” (Ex. 35.4 –10) See you here the glorification of matter which you make inglorious. What is more insignificant than

goat's hair or colours? Are not scarlet and purple and hyacinth colours? Now, consider the handiwork of man becoming the likeness of the cherubim. How, then, can you make the law a pretence for giving up what it orders? If you invoke it against images, you should keep the Sabbath, and practise circumcision. It is certain that "if you observe the law, Christ will not profit you. You who are justified in the law, you are fallen from grace." (Gal. 5.2– 4) Israel of old did not see God, but "we see the Lord's glory face to face." (II Cor. 3.18)

We proclaim Him also by our senses on all sides, and we sanctify the noblest sense, which is that of sight. The image is a memorial, just what words are to a listening ear. What a book is to the literate, that an image is to the illiterate. The image speaks to the sight as words to the ear; it brings us understanding. Hence God ordered the ark to be made of imperishable wood, and to be gilded outside and in, and the tablets to be put in it, and the staff and the golden urn containing the manna, for a remembrance of the past and a type of the future. Who can say these were not images and far-sounding heralds? And they did not hang on the walls of the tabernacle; but in sight of all the people who looked towards them, they were brought forward for the worship and adoration of God, who made use of them. It is evident that they were not worshipped for themselves, but that the people were led through them to remember past signs, and to worship the God of wonders. They were images to serve as recollections, not divine, but leading to divine things by divine power. (pp. 15–19)

more and more with ikons and used them to help increase their own power. A mark of this was when the Quinisext Council (the Council in Trullo) in 691/2 decreed that Christ should not be depicted as a symbol but rather "in his human form." Also significant was Justinian II's representation of Christ as the main image on Byzantine coins, an indication that the emperor and undoubtedly many of his subjects regarded such images as appropriate and important in maintaining the well-being of the empire.

Ikons were also a personal expression of devotion which was particularly important in a difficult age when many of the institutions of the time were apparently falling apart. Thus, an individual or a family might have an ikon of its own, to which persons might be especially devoted. From an early time ikons were also seen as miraculous and as "localizing" the power of God, the Virgin, or an individual saint. Thus, an ikon brought the presence of divine power directly to the individual worshipers, regardless of where they were, and allowed them to speak directly to the divine and to seek aid for all their needs. Not surprisingly, the ikons, as localized manifestations of the divine, were frequently thought to honor the requests of the faithful, and miracles were often attested and widely praised.

Although the veneration of ikons was probably something that originated in popular devotion and had strong connections with the cult of the saints, it was also supported by significant aspects of the Byzantine intellectual tradition. We have already seen how Neoplatonism was perhaps the dominant philosophical

tradition in the early Byzantine period. Neoplatonism, as developed and Christianized, created a Christian view of images that maintained a close relationship between the prototype (in this case, Christ or the saint depicted) and the image represented in the ikon. This was something very important to the broader Byzantine view of reality, which saw the world here and now as an imperfect reflection of the divine perfection of the Kingdom of Heaven, just as the emperor was seen as an imperfect reflection of God, and the empire was a copy of God's everlasting Kingdom. Thus, in terms of the sacred ikon, the prototype and the image were the same in significant ways; a prayer or veneration offered to the ikon was, in fact, offered to the original, and the ikon could also "act" on behalf of Christ or the saint, as depicted in the image. These ideas were put forth, refined, and delineated by theologians such as John of Damascus.

In terms of style, the ikons were clearly derived from a variety of traditions. As one might imagine in an image designed for religious use (rather than as a work of art), the figure in an ikon is normally represented frontally, with large staring eyes that usually look right at the believer. Commonly there was little or no background detail, since the image is designed to facilitate communication between the divine and the worldly spheres, and there was relatively little concern for realism. These artistic conventions most resembled those of Syria and Egypt, especially the so-called Fayum portraits, paintings from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt depicting the dead on their caskets. One may argue that the artistic tradition represented in Byzantine ikons is essentially that of the Hellenistic Near East, but it is clear that the more "realistic" tradition of the Greco-Roman world is also represented, especially in some of the early ikons, probably from Constantinople, now in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Ikons might be in any medium, but most were in encaustic technique, painted on wooden panels.

The Outbreak of Iconoclasm

As mentioned above, some people had always been opposed to the production and veneration of ikons, largely because they saw them as a violation of the Mosaic commandment against the making of "graven images." This opposition, however, had never previously coalesced into a movement of any kind, and the emperors had not been involved in the issue in a significant way, except perhaps when Justinian II put the image of Christ on coins and the Quinisext Council

forbade the symbolic representation of Christ.

All this changed under Leo III. According to the ninth-century monastic chronicler Theophanes, who was very hostile to Iconoclasm (and hence to Leo III and his successors), Leo “began speaking against ikons” in 726 and ultimately ordered that the great ikon of Christ be removed from the Chalke Gate of the palace. This aroused considerable opposition, in both Constantinople and the western provinces. As a result, in 730 Leo summoned a meeting of the imperial council of his advisers (the *silention*) which declared the veneration of ikons to be illegal and ordered their confiscation. As might be expected, this policy met with considerable opposition. The patriarch Germanos expressed his support of ikons and he was deposed, while the governor of the *theme* of Hellas used the occasion to mount a revolt, which was apparently easily put down. The papacy had always been strongly in favor of the veneration of images, so Leo’s policies led to a schism between the two churches. The emperor’s officials apparently removed figural decoration from churches and other public places, but there seems to have been no real persecution of Iconophiles, as those who supported the veneration of ikons may be called.

Figure 8.2 Iconoclasts at work. This miniature from the Khludov Psalter in the State Historical Museum, Moscow depicts the Iconoclasts removing the sacred images from various places in Constantinople. Reproduced by permission of the State Historical Museum, Moscow.



Modern historians have provided many different explanations for the outbreak of “official” Iconoclasm under Leo III and these have varied significantly. Theophanes (who wrote in the early ninth century) says that Leo’s Iconoclastic policy was a result of influence from Jews and Arabs. Even though both Judaism and Islam were both iconoclastic in sentiment, there seems to be no reason to believe that the examples of these religions were the ultimate cause of Byzantine Iconoclasm. Theophanes, to be sure, creates a confusing story, connecting Leo’s policy with an Arab vizier and a Jewish wizard, who were supposed to have had an influence on the emperor. Most scholars today doubt any such influence except in the most general sense, even though it seems as though this outbreak of official Iconoclasm followed shortly after the caliph Yazid’s attempt to remove ikons in Christian churches under the control of the caliphate.

Some historians have seen the Iconoclastic controversy as a struggle between the eastern and western parts of the empire, with the East supporting Iconoclasm and the West the veneration of ikons; alternatively, the controversy has been viewed as a struggle between the “oriental” and the “western” (or Greek) elements in Byzantine civilization, with Iconoclasm an expression of the eastern or even “Semitic” tradition and the veneration of ikons an expression of the Greek tradition of representational art. Another explanation provided by modern

historians is that Leo used Iconoclasm as an attack on monasteries, since monks were the most ardent supporters of ikons, but this is hardly convincing. Still another view is that Iconoclasm was simply a result of the emperor's autocratic tendency, since the struggle could be seen as one between the emperor and the ikon, as God's representative on earth. This latter interpretation has perhaps some validity since there is considerable evidence of Leo's strong-minded rule and, like many of the emperors before him, he certainly thought that he could decide matters of belief on his own.

Despite all these theories, the most convincing explanation for Leo's action seems to be his own personal belief. As we have seen, many Christians (perhaps primarily in the East) regarded the veneration of ikons as a serious sin, and presumably they felt that God was punishing the empire for the growth of this practice over the past few centuries. Thus, in this view, the failure of Byzantium to stem the Arab tide was God's response to the idolatry of Christians who venerated images and placed them in churches and in prominent public places throughout the empire. Leo, it will be remembered, had reigned for nearly ten years before he began to speak openly against the ikons and, when he decided to take action, apparently he did not act directly against the individuals who venerated them, but rather against the public display of ikons – something which might have been taken to displease God more than anything else. Further, Theophanes provides us with information that may help to explain why Leo decided to act precisely when he did. Thus, Theophanes tells us that in the year prior to Leo's first public attack on ikons the empire was struck by the "wrath of God": the island of Thera (in the middle of the Aegean Sea) was wracked by a terrible volcanic eruption that threw out huge flames and floating pumice that was found as far away as Macedonia. We can never be sure, of course, but such an obvious indication of God's anger might easily suggest that something had to be done. If Leo already was an Iconoclast, he may well have been moved by this event to act publicly, and his actions seem to accord with this interpretation. It is true that some bishops of Asia Minor had already been trying to stop the veneration of ikons, and they may well have provided the impetus and the spiritual and theological support for Leo's policies. Nonetheless, the evidence does not suggest that Leo III was motivated by anything other than his own belief that the veneration of ikons was wrong and that, as emperor, he had a responsibility to God and to his subjects to insist on correct religious practice. His own tendency toward autocracy made him act without regard to any opposition and the result was real turmoil within the empire, especially because

what he did recalled the worst experience of Christians in which past emperors had tried to impose their own religious views on the empire without consideration of the wishes of the broader public. Leo did not, of course, act alone, and his followers presumably had various reasons for supporting Iconoclasm, not least of which may have been a natural desire to agree with imperial policy, as well as their own understanding of how the difficulties experienced at the time must ultimately have been a result of divine displeasure. The majority of the Iconophiles must likewise have been motivated by personal support for the veneration of ikons and their understanding of church practice and tradition. In addition, many ecclesiastical leaders of the Iconophiles clearly reacted strongly to what they perceived as an emperor seeking to impose his own will on the church of God.

Constantine V (741–775)

Under Leo III's son and successor, the Isaurian dynasty reached the height of its power, and Iconoclast policy hardened into outright persecution of the Iconophiles (or Iconodoules, as they are sometimes called).

Constantine V is one of the most interesting of all Byzantine emperors. His rule was generally successful and he was intelligent and determined; yet the Iconophile sources viewed him as their greatest enemy, so his reputation has been blackened beyond that of almost any other emperor. Constantine was born in 718 and the Iconophile sources say that when he was being baptized he defecated in the baptismal font, giving rise to his nickname of Kopronymos ("Dung-name"). He was crowned as co-emperor in 720 and in 732 he was married to Irene, the daughter of the Khazar khan; after her death, he married twice.

Figure 8.3 Gold coin of Constantine V and Leo IV. The obverse of this coin shows Leo III, the reverse Constantine V with his son Leo IV. The coin was designed to stress the dynastic aspect of political power at this time and to hearken back to the founder of the dynasty, Leo III. Thus, the legend of the reverse reads: "Constantine and Leo the Younger," the latter epithet designed to connect the grandson (Leo IV) with his grandfather (Leo III). The appearance of Leo III on the obverse of the coin is a rare instance in which a former emperor appears on Byzantine coinage. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



Although Leo III had clearly designated Constantine to succeed him, a revolt broke out immediately in 741, led by his brother-in-law Artabasdos, who apparently opposed Leo's Iconoclasm. Artabasdos initially defeated Constantine, gained control of Constantinople, and sought to establish a dynasty of his own. Constantine, however, defeated him in 743 and regained control of the capital, blinding Artabasdos and his sons.

Once established firmly on the throne, Constantine V continued the successful military policy of his father and was able to take the offensive in Asia Minor. The Arabs were weakened by their own political problems, which led to the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty and its replacement by the Abbasid dynasty in 750. The Arab capital was moved from Damascus (in Syria) to Baghdad (in Iraq) and the Abbasids were generally less concerned with their western frontier (and warfare with Byzantium) than the Umayyads had been.

Just as the Arab threat began to abate, however, there was a new danger from Bulgaria. Constantine pursued an aggressive policy against the Bulgars and dealt them a crushing blow at the Battle of Anchialos in 763. At the same time Constantine V almost completely ignored the situation in Italy, in part because he realized that his support for Iconoclasm prevented any rapprochement with the papacy, and this led to a considerable change in the political equilibrium in Italy. Since 726 the papacy had disagreed with Byzantine policy on Iconoclasm and it now saw little difference between the "schismatic" Greeks and the Germanic Lombards who had threatened papal possessions over the past two centuries. Previously, the papacy had looked to the Byzantine emperor as a military protector, but Iconoclasm and the lack of interest of the Isaurian emperors led to the collapse of this bond and to major changes in relations between Byzantium and the papacy. In 751 Ravenna fell to the Lombards and the Exarchate of Ravenna ceased to exist. It was probably in this general context (although some scholars put the event earlier, under Leo III) that Constantine V removed southern Italy, Sicily, and the southern Balkans (including Greece) from the ecclesiastical authority of the papacy and placed it under that of the

patriarch of Constantinople. Leo had already quarreled with the pope about the payment of taxes and other matters in Italy, and the religious dispute over Iconoclasm made the break final. From this time forward, these areas remained under the ecclesiastical authority of Constantinople, in the case of Italy until it fell out of Byzantine military control (the last bit in AD 1071), while Greece has, of course, remained part of the eastern Christian sphere up to the present.

Constantine V was the most ferocious of the Iconoclast emperors. He apparently believed strongly in Iconoclast doctrine and composed theological tracts himself. While Leo III seems to have supported Iconoclasm as a result of his fairly basic belief in Biblical prohibitions of “graven images,” his son was a sophisticated thinker, who had a real grasp of the philosophical and theological issues involved. As a result, an Iconoclast theology was formed, and Christological arguments came to play a dominant role in the controversy. Under Constantine V, Iconoclast theologians began to see connections with the theological disputes of the past 400 years: they argued that images, in fact, raised once again the Christological problems of the fifth century. In their view, if one accepted the veneration of ikons of Christ, one was guilty of either saying that the painting was a representation of God himself (thus merging the human and the divine elements of Christ into one) or, alternatively, maintaining that the ikon depicted Christ’s human form alone (thus separating the human and the divine elements of Christ) – neither of which was acceptable. Thus, under Constantine V, the Iconoclastic controversy, which had originally been a debate about church usage and principles of public veneration, suddenly raised again all the difficult theological issues of the past.

Constantine V summoned a church council, which he naturally packed with supporters of Iconoclasm. This met at the imperial palace of Hieria on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphoros in 754 and proclaimed Iconoclast theology as orthodox, despite the opposition of important theologians such as the former patriarch Germanos, John of Damascus, and Stephen of Mount Auxentios. Although most of the treatises written by the Iconoclasts have not survived, the decisions of the Council of Hieria are preserved, since they were read into and condemned by the later Iconophile Council of Nicaea. Armed with this decision, Constantine instituted a persecution of Iconophiles. He sought to root them out of the bureaucracy and the army, and he struck especially at the monasteries, which were the centers of ikon veneration. In his zeal, Constantine went beyond the teachings of the Council of Hieria and condemned the cult of saints and relics (except, interestingly, those of the True Cross). He is even said to have

personally scraped holy pictures from the walls of churches in Constantinople. Although Constantine V was reviled by the Iconophile tradition as the worst of the persecuting Iconoclasts, he was a remarkably successful general and his memory survived among those who continued to respect his military prowess. There is also good reason to believe that Constantine was enormously popular in Constantinople itself, not least because he improved the standard of living within the city and provided its inhabitants with plentiful, inexpensive food. He died in 775 while leading his troops against the Bulgars.

Leo IV the Khazar (775–780)

Leo IV was the son of Constantine V and his Khazar wife, Irene, so he is often called “the Khazar.” He was crowned co-emperor in 751, shortly after his birth, and in 769 his father married him to Irene, a young orphan brought from the remote provincial town of Athens. Shortly after his accession he had their son Constantine VI proclaimed as emperor, prompting the revolt of his five halfbrothers, who had hoped to succeed to the throne. Little is known of Leo’s reign, but he did campaign against the Arabs in Asia Minor and against the Bulgars; he died of a fever in 780 while leading the army in person. Leo IV was himself an Iconoclast, but he did not continue the violent persecutions of his father, in part as a result of the influence of his wife Irene, who was an Iconophile.

Under the Isaurian dynasty the principle of undivided hereditary rule continued to grow stronger, and, following the precedent of his father and his grandfather, Leo IV crowned his young son Constantine VI as emperor, thus assuring the continuity of the dynasty.

The Reign of Irene and the First Restoration of Ikons

When Leo IV died he was only 30 years old. His wife Irene emerged as the regent for her son Constantine VI, but she was only about 28 years of age and her son only 9. Irene’s position was precarious: she was an Iconophile and had already been involved in a movement to bring ikons back into the imperial palace, and, as we have seen, there had already been an abortive revolt against the succession of Constantine VI. As a woman, Irene naturally had no military

experience, and the army had been the dominant institution of Byzantium for at least the past century. In addition, there were significant rivals for power in the persons of the sons of Constantine V, the younger half-brothers of Leo IV. Irene, nonetheless, emerged as one of the most interesting of the many women rulers of Byzantium, and her character, while perhaps not always admirable by modern standards, was certainly strong and determined. Although her major goal always seemed to be the restoration of ikons, Irene also took a strongly proactive interest in military and political affairs and she was the only Byzantine woman to assume for herself the masculine title of “emperor” (*basileus*). She appointed administrators loyal to herself, starting with the eunuch Stavrakios as *logothete tou dromou*, and dismissed many experienced military commanders (including figures such as Michael Lachanodrakon who had been appointed by Constantine V), replacing them with inexperienced commanders who would support her desire to end Iconoclasm. Remarkably enough, her reign began with significant military success against the Slavs and the Arabs, and in 784 she was able to encourage the appointment of her former secretary Tarasios, who was at the time a layman, as patriarch of Constantinople. Tarasios was quickly ordained a priest and almost immediately enthroned as bishop, much to the chagrin of some members of the clergy, who felt that only priests with a long history of service should be made bishops.

Irene arranged an ecumenical council to carry out the restoration of ikons and the reversal of imperial policy. This council opened in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople in 786. By this time the highest command of the army was loyal to Irene, but members of the *tagmata* (imperial troops stationed in Constantinople) continued to support Iconoclasm and they rioted outside the council, forcing it to disband. Irene realized the danger posed by these military units and ordered them to be transferred to Asia Minor in preparation for a campaign in the East. As soon as they were outside the city, she had them dismissed from the army. Secure in her control of the situation, Irene ordered the council to assemble again in 787, this time in Nicaea, site of the first ecumenical council. Under the presidency of Tarasios, the Second Council of Nicaea duly condemned Iconoclasm without any real resistance. Former Iconoclasts were allowed to repent and most were even able to maintain their positions in the church and state; Irene, of course, had a real interest in making sure that her former husband and his family were not severely condemned since her own position depended completely on her relationship with them.

In an attempt to mend relations with the West, Constantine VI had been

betrothed to Rotrud, the daughter of Charlemagne (Charles the Great), king of the Franks (and later western emperor), and one can only wonder what might have followed had that marriage taken place. As it happened, Irene broke off the engagement and in 787 arranged a “bride show” in which she selected a wife, the saintly Maria, for her son. By 790, when he was 19 years old, Constantine sought to rule in his own name and, although a plot against Stavrakios failed, the army eventually came to support him, and Constantine assumed power in his own name; Irene was sent into isolation in an imperial palace just outside Constantinople. Constantine VI was, however, not a successful ruler, the political situation was divided among various centers of power, and in 792 he was forced to recall his mother to the throne; mother and son

Box 8.3 The Decree of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)

The year 787 witnessed the end of the first period of Iconoclasm, as the empress Irene, widow of Leo IV, single-mindedly set about to restore the veneration of ikons. She encountered significant opposition within the army and the organization of the church but dealt with her opponents harshly and ultimately got her way. The following text is part of the final decree of the bishops who met in Nicaea to proclaim the new religious policy. In this proclamation, notice that the bishops refer to the “Catholic Church,” meaning the “universal church,” which they wish to distinguish from the church of the Iconoclasts. Notice also how much this document reflects the ideas of John of Damascus, for example, in the reference to tradition as passed down through the centuries, and to the distinction between “veneration” (*proskynesis*), which it is appropriate to render to the images, and “worship” (*latreia*), which is due to God alone.

To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely fantastic, for these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations.

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence (*proskynesis*), not indeed that true worship of faith (*latreia*) which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents,

and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented. For thus the teaching of our holy Fathers, that is the tradition of the Catholic Church, which from one end of the earth to the other hath received the Gospel, is strengthened. Thus we follow Paul, who spake in Christ, and the whole divine Apostolic company and the holy Fathers, holding fast the traditions which we have received. So we sing prophetically the triumphal hymns of the Church, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion; Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Rejoice and be glad with all thy heart. The Lord hath taken away from thee the oppression of thy adversaries; thou art redeemed from the hand of thine enemies. The Lord is a King in the midst of thee; thou shalt not see evil any more, and peace be unto thee forever."

Those, therefore who dare to think or teach otherwise, or as wicked heretics to spurn the traditions of the Church and to invent some novelty, or else to reject some of those things which the Church hath received (e.g., the Book of the Gospels, or the image of the cross, or the pictorial icons, or the holy relics of a martyr), or evilly and sharply to devise anything subversive of the lawful traditions of the Catholic Church or to turn to common uses the sacred vessels or the venerable monasteries, if they be Bishops or Clerics, we command that they be deposed; if religious or lay-persons, that they be cut off from communion. (*The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, trans. H. R. Percival, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York, 1890; repr. Grand Rapids, MI, 1955), vol. 14, p. 550)

then ruled together, in an uneasy alliance, for another five years. In 795 Constantine divorced his wife and married again, earning the outspoken opposition of the two monks, Plato of Sakkoudion and his nephew Theodore (later known as Theodore of Stoudios, from his being a monk at the famous monastery of Stoudios in the outskirts of Constantinople). They objected that Constantine's remarriage was illegal under church law and argued that the emperor was therefore guilty of adultery. Theodore's outspoken opposition to the emperor resulted in his exile from Constantinople. This was the beginning of the so-called Moechian (Adultery) controversy, an issue that was far broader than the mere question of Constantine's marital situation, since it involved an attempt on the part of certain groups within the church to dictate to the emperor what he could and could not do. Not surprisingly, some of the church leaders who wanted to impose stronger penalties on the former Iconoclasts were ranged alongside Plato and Theodore in opposition to Constantine's second marriage. Some modern historians have seen in this monastic opposition the characteristics of a political party and they labeled them "zealots." While this is certainly a misleading analogy, there is no doubt that, in much of Byzantine history, political and religious concerns often interacted in significant ways and, in this particular period, concerns about Iconoclasm, the morality of the emperors, the power of monastic leaders, and dynastic politics frequently combined in ever-changing ways that had, nevertheless, a significant impact on political and religious life. In addition, one can view the conflict as relating to the

fundamental and broader question of who correctly represented the will of God in Byzantine society: the emperor or the church. Rarely was this tension expressed clearly as such: the condemnation of Theodosios I by Ambrose in 390 was one famous early example, and the tensions brought out by the struggle over ikons reflected this important issue.

Meanwhile, the rule of Irene and Constantine faltered in the face of military defeats at the hands of the Arabs and continued friction between mother and son. Finally, in 797 some of Irene's supporters seized the young emperor and blinded him, probably as a result of which Constantine died. In the aftermath Irene was in sole control of the Byzantine state, and she was (as we have seen), the only empress to use the male form of the imperial title *basileus*.

Plots continued to haunt Irene, centering on the sons of Constantine V who, although mutilated and exiled, formed a focus for the discontented. The Arabs also had military successes, especially since Irene's policies had weakened the army and drained the treasuries and since the caliph Harun-ar-Raschid (786–809) was one of the strongest and most accomplished rulers the Byzantines were to face. In the West the reign of Irene witnessed an especially important development, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor at Rome on Christmas day of 800.

The broader alliance between the papacy and the Frankish monarchy was of worldwide importance and it had significant long-term impact on the relationship between Byzantium and the West. Thus, one should remember that at least since the reign of Justinian, Byzantium had retained a significant interest in the West, particularly in Italy, and Konstantinos II in the mid seventh century considered the possibility of moving the seat of Byzantine power to the West. The advance of Islam and the emergence of Iconoclasm had sent further waves of Byzantine refugees to Italy and Byzantine cultural influence in the West was high: popes such as Agatho I, John V, John VI, and Zacharias I (late seventh to mid eighth century) were from Greek-speaking families. Furthermore, the papacy was situated in territories that had long been threatened by Arian Germanic peoples, with whom they had theological difficulties, and the popes generally looked to the orthodox Byzantine emperor as a military protector. From 726 onward, however, the emperors were Iconoclasts and thus heretics in the eyes of the papacy. Meanwhile, the power of the Germanic Franks had been growing north of the Alps. Their rulers had been Catholic (i.e., orthodox) from the time of the conversion of their king Clovis in AD 498 and they extended their power over much of what is now France and western Germany. In the early

eighth century, shortly after Leo III's attack on ikons in Constantinople, Charles Martel (the de facto but not legal ruler of the Franks) defeated the Arabs at the Battle of Tours in southern France (732; Map 9.1). Charles' son, Pepin (Pippin) the Short, was made king of the Franks in 751 with the support of Pope Stephen II and from that time onward the Franks replaced the Byzantines as the main political defenders of the popes. Pepin's son Charles succeeded him as king and in the 770s he defeated the Lombards and gained control over most of northern Italy. This situation was also affected by local politics in Rome itself, where at the end of the eighth century Pope Leo III ran afoul of powerful enemies in the city. All of this led to one of the major events in the history of the medieval West, where, on Christmas day 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charles (known also as Charles the Great or Charlemagne) as emperor.

With the coronation of Charlemagne the problem of the two emperors came to the fore. Up to that point most people believed that there was (or should be) one Christian society ruled by one emperor. Thus, in this context the Byzantine Empire made universal claims that were, to some degree, acknowledged even in the West. Now, with the coronation of Charlemagne the situation was confused. Some westerners claimed that a woman (namely Irene) could not be emperor and, thus, the throne in Byzantium was vacant. Both Charlemagne and the papacy realized that the coronation meant a direct challenge to Byzantium in one way or another. The Byzantine Empire saw Charlemagne as a usurper (since he claimed that he was "emperor"), and Irene's inability to oppose him by force certainly weakened her domestic political situation. Charlemagne, meanwhile, realized that his claim to imperial power was meaningless without some acknowledgment from the Byzantines. He therefore sent an embassy to Constantinople offering to marry Irene, and the empress' apparent willingness to consider such a remarkable proposal only caused further distress and opposition in Constantinople.

FURTHER READING

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